Christmas Plants

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THE custom of decorating with evergreens at Christmas comes from many diverse and far away places, from Christian, pre-Christian and pagan cultures. Centuries ago, Jewish communities used boughs of trees to adorn the booths which they set up each autumn for the "Feast of the Tabernacles." The Romans exchanged green branches with their friends at the turn of the year for good luck. In ancient Britain the cutting of mistletoe every winter was an important and elaborate rite. The head Druid went out into the woods with a golden sickle kept only for this purpose. When he reached the chosen oak tree, he had to climb it to cut the mistletoe, which he then dopped into a sheet held out by a group of special maidens. The plant was divided up and a small piece hung over each person's door for its protective and curative properties.

Leaders of the early Christian church were dubious about permitting customs which had heathen associations. Some sects banned altogether the use of fresh plants in their churches. In some Protestant churches of Polynesia today, fresh flowers are still forbidden, a relic of the strict rules of the London Missionary Society which first brought Christianity to the islands. During funerals, coffins are adorned with rather dreadful plastic flowers. But in most places church leaders bent their principles in the face of traditions which were so obviously important to the people, and green plants were gradually allowed back into the places of worship, and homes.

Here in Virginia we have an abundance of greenery in the woods in December, and most Virginians are enthusiastic Christmas decorators. Some of the plants we use are steeped in ancient tradition, holly, ivy, mistletoe; and some have no particular historical significance but are just plain beautiful.

The familiar holly tree found up and down the eastern United States is *Ilex opaca,* the American holly, belonging to the holly family or Aquifoliaceae. The trees are dioecious; that is, the flowers are of two types, male and female, and occur on different trees. Only the female trees have the red berries so prized as Christmas decorations. The American holly can grow into a big tree up to 90 feet high. The leaves are shiny and evergreen. They are shed mostly in the springtime and early summer, but at no time is the tree completely without foliage. There is another smaller evergreen holly found in the southeastern part of the state with the unattractive name *Ilex vomitoria,* so called for the strongly emetic and purgative properties of its leaves. However, it is attractive to *look* at, with less spiny leaves than the American holly and clusters of brilliant red berries. It is known commonly as the yaupon and is also used for decoration. There are several species of deciduous holly in the state. These drop their leaves in winter, but still have attractive and often very large red berries which make good additions to Christmas garlands.

There are innumerable legends about the origin of the first Christmas tree. One of the simplest and most appealing tells the story of the date palm, the olive and the pine tree, all of which went to the stable at Bethlehem to pay their respects to the Christ-child. The date and the olive presented their fruits as gifts but the pine tree felt it had nothing to give. Noting its embarrassment, some stars descended from the sky and arranged themselves in the pine tree's branches—and there was the first Christmas tree. The idea of having a decorated evergreen tree at Christmas certainly came into this country with the earliest European settlers and is almost certainly here to stay! In Virginia there is plenty of choice about what kind of tree to have. The three main native trees which are used are the white pine, *Pinus Strobus,* more common in the southwestern part of the state, the Virginia pine, *Pinus virginiana,* particularly in the southeast and coastal plain, and the red cedar or juniper, *Juniperus virginiana,* especially in northern Virginia. However, the Scotch pine, a native of Europe but very prosperous in this climate, is also grown here for Christmas trees. Many Christmas trees come from the thinnings of plantations of conifers which are otherwise being grown for lumber or pulp wood. They are not always symmetrical when grown under crowded conditions, but both retailers and consumers do a good deal of picking and choosing to get the best-looking ones. Many other species are brought into the state from further north. Shipments of spruce come down from Canada. The trees are cut earlier in the year for lumber, their tops are preserved in cold storage and then sent south at the end of the year.

In my home in England we did not have many family traditions at Christmas. We always had a good time, but we did not have a lot of rituals about which we all felt very strongly and which were scrupulously carried out year after year. We did not necessarily always have a Christmas tree. I was therefore surprised at myself after I grew up and started to plan Christmas in my new home in Virginia to remember something about which I did feel very strongly. This was that *my*

(Continued from page 17)

Christmas tree must have *roots*. I cannot bear to see those cast-off trees lying forlornly outside everyone's door in January. I'm not even very keen on seeing them piled up, ready to be sold in December, even if I know that they have been culled in the best interests of forest management. Our Christmas trees are smaller than most people's but appreciated, I'm sure, quite equally. We dig them up in the woods, usually white pines but sometimes an eastern hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis;* then we have the great pleasure of replanting them outside after Christmas and watching them grow up over the years.

A composite arrangement of four species of Christmas plants.

The pagan associations of mistletoe still linger on, and it is not usually brought into churches. The Norse god Balder was killed by an arrow made from mistletoe because it was the one plant his mother forgot about when she requested every other growing thing not to harm him. His mother later forgave the mistletoe, so it was partially redeemed, and nowadays people bring it into their homes for good luck just as the Celtic families did in ancient Britain. Besides general good luck, of course, it endows the place over which it hangs with special dispensation such that any man may embrace any lady he catches there. Mistletoe is a partial parasite growing mainly on oaks and persimmons. It does possess green leaves but also obtains nourishment by sending sucking organs or *haustoria* into the host tree. The white berries are sticky and adhere to the bills of birds, thus helping to effect the plant's dispersal.

In addition to the traditional greenery which is also used in many other parts of the world at Christmas, we have some plants in Virginia which have no special Yuletide significance but make lovely decorations. The leaves of *Galax aphylla,* wandflower or beetleweed, are shiny and water resistant and stay green all winter, even after picking. When we were in England, some North Carolina friends sent us a box of Galax leaves instead of a Christmas card. I arranged them in a fan design and stuck them up over the fireplace of our 400-year-old English farmhouse in Oxfordshire. There they stayed for a year, looking most attractive and reminding us delightfully of the Appalachians. Galax belongs in a strange little family called the Diapensiaceae, tucked in between the heaths and the primroses. It is widespread throughout the open woods of the southern Appalachians and has a tall spike of little white flowers which bloom in early summer.

No mantlepiece here is complete in December without a strand of running cedar trailing across it. *Lycopodium complanatum,* known variously as running cedar or evergreen, trailing evergreen, ground pine, ground cedar, Christmas green, creeping Jenny and in Quebec as Courants Verts, belongs to the Lycopodiaceae or club-moss family, a primitive group of Pteridophytes (ferns and their allies). Running cedar has a trailing stem with perpendicular branches densely covered with small leaves. The fruiting bodies are borne at the tips of longer stems, hence the family name of club-moss. There are many varieties of running cedar and some of the finer points of its taxomony are rather confused. But there is no need to worry about classification when collecting it for the house. All the varieties are pretty, and it is found in large patches throughout the woods and thickets of the state.

Because of its long, flexible stem, running cedar is a popular plant for Christmas wreaths. So, of course, is ivy. The custom of hanging up wreaths is widespread in the South and nowadays merely seems to indicate that people within wish well to all the people without. Wreath-making in Virginia has reached an advanced state of craftsmanship and uses all kinds of materials. Perhaps the prettiest ones are those made out of natural twining greenery and studded with cones and seedpods which, if not actually native to the state, at least grow here now!

So in December we have a special reason for keeping an eye open for attractive greenery in the woods. Our own decorations will not be elaborate, but they will be enthusiastically gathered. We anticipate that they will help to make the occasion a good one—as we hope it will also be for everyone else.